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1 Kings 19:1-18
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Hearing God's Whisper

Nicolas Herman grew up as a young man during the tumultuous years of the mid 17th century France. His family was quite poor so he sought the stability and provision of the military. During his service, he had a vision that he believed was from God. He saw a leaf-barren tree standing in the middle of a battlefield, knowing that it would flower and leaf out soon. He took this as a symbol of God's ability to transform even the most barren human heart.

Shortly afterwards, a leg injury led him to join the same Carmelite monastery to which his uncle belonged. Within this community, Herman who became Brother Lawrence found faith, joy, and purpose even in the most mundane tasks. Many sought his wisdom and spiritual counsel.

Today, Brother Lawrence is most known for a little book that he wrote describing his days at the monastery. *Practicing the Presence of God*. He believed that whatever task he did was an invitation to do it for Jesus, with Jesus. Whether it was buying wine for the monastery, washing dishes, or repairing sandals, no matter how mundane or seemingly insignificant, Brother Lawrence did it as if doing it for the Lord, and with the Lord.

His daily communion with God still speaks to us today.

Brother Lawrence once said, "There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God."

Contrast that to how so often we expect God to speak today. Through major life events. In times of great tragedy. When we are most desperate.

Like in our Scripture story today. God's prophet Elijah was fleeing for his life from the evil Jezebel after he had zealously slain all the false prophets who typically gave King Ahab and his wife Jezebel counsel. Elijah needed a word from God. He needed to hear God's voice for wisdom, direction, and encouragement. He expected it to come through some grandiose form. It came, however, through God's silence.

Join me as I read this story from 1 Kings 19:1-18.

Now Ahab told Jezebel everything Elijah had done and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. **2** So Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah to say, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like that of one of them."

3 Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, **4** while he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might

die. “I have had enough, Lord,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” **5** Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep.

All at once an angel touched him and said, “Get up and eat.” **6** He looked around, and there by his head was some bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again.

7 The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, “Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you.” **8** So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. **9** There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

10 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

11 The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. **12** After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. **13** When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

14 He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

15 The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. **16** Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. **17** Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. **18** Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

Let us pray. Prayer of illumination.

As we talk about hearing Gods’ voice through whisper, I want to begin by contrasting Elijah’s ministry with Jesus’.

Elijah was zealous and took matters into his own hands. Jesus trusted God with all things, even his reputation and need to defend himself.

Elijah was on the run. Jesus didn't run anywhere.

Elijah was tired and burned out. Jesus knew his limits and frequently retreated for rest, renewal, silence and solitude.

Elijah was self-righteous and felt the need to justify himself before God. Jesus never exploited his position as God's son.

Elijah tried doing ministry in his own strength and power. Jesus knew that all his power came from God the Father.

Elijah wanted to escape his call and die. Jesus embraced his call to sacrifice and offered his life for us all.

All of this came from Jesus' ability to cultivate the ability to hear God's whisper amidst the frantic noise of life and ministry.

I think there were three main spiritual practices that Jesus exhibited that we could learn from today and put into practice in our own lives. Those are silence, solitude, and Sabbath.

Imagine how noise filled Jesus' world must have been! Everywhere he went, his reputation preceded him. Crowds constantly demanded, "Jesus, heal my dying daughter. Jesus, help my servant. Jesus, if you had only been here, my brother would not have died." Everyone bringing their stories of woe and intense need. We can only imagine that even for the Son of God, the constant demand must have been overwhelming.

Still, Jesus knew that in order for him to remain connected to God the Father and do what only he could do, that he needed times of quiet. Stillness. So that he could hear God's voice over and above the noise of life.

Karen talks about a teacher she once had whose technique to get her students to quiet down was to quiet her voice so that the students would have to become quiet themselves in order to hear her next instruction. How very opposite that is of our culture, right? Today the more people want our attentions the louder, more obnoxious and profane they become. But does it really have the impact that they would expect? I think not.

Psalms 46 speaks to this same quality of God and the way God works to get our attentions. "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."

Elijah expected God to say something through the storm, the earthquake, and the fire. And yet, God was silent. And sometimes I think we too expect God to say something when these traumatic moments occur and we cry out to God and God seems to say nothing.

I'm sure people must have questioned God's silence during the devastating Maui wildfires this past summer. But then God spoke volumes in the aftermath as the community came together, picked up the pieces of life, and found hope for the future. I'm sure the people of Israel and Palestine are asking similar questions today.

Notice how Psalm 46 ends with God speaking after the fact, "Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

The command "Be Still" comes from the Hebrew word *raphah*. It means to stop, abate, or be faint. The image that comes to mind is that of a fussing, tantrum throwing child having just missed their nap. And then once they are strapped into their carseat and restrained from further fighting, they give up, and finally fall asleep.

Now I wrote this before my trip to Pensacola, Florida last week. And as what often happens, God challenges me with my own teaching. Guess who sat behind me on our flight home. That fussing, tantrum throwing child who kicked my seat and screamed for four hours. I chuckled to myself saying, "Ok God, I get it. I get it. She can stop kicking my seat!"

She finally fell asleep as we landed in Seattle.

That is what it means to "Be Still." To stop fighting against God and instead rest in his restraint where we can be ready to hear from God. This is where the spiritual discipline of silence, solitude, and sabbath come into play.

Yet, we struggle with silence in our culture. We are always hurrying. Always rushing to get to that place or the next. Rushing to get the kids off to school. Rushing to get that project done. Rushing to church. It should be no surprise that as we bring that hurried spirit into worship that we struggle to hear a word from God. And even still, God invites us to come, to stop our hurrying, and "Be Still" in his presence.

Habakkuk 2:20 says, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

You might have noticed the announcement at the start of worship to please resist talking during the prelude, choral anthem, and offertory. These are important moments to quiet our souls and let the music prepare our hearts to hear from God. Let us come with the expectation that God wants to meet with us. But know that God will not speak over the noise of us talking just so God can be heard. We also want to respect the work that our musicians have put into creating such a holy space for us.

The next practice I want to talk about is solitude. Notice how Elijah sought solitude only because he was forced to escape Jezebel's threats. That is not ministering out of a healthy balance. It is ministering out of desperation. It would

have been better if he could have regularly taken Jesus' lead on proactively seeking times of solitude before this crisis occurred.

Richard Foster in his classic, *Celebration of Discipline*, wrote, in solitude "there is the freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people, but in order to hear the divine whisper better. Jesus lived in inward 'heart solitude.' He also frequently experienced outward solitude."¹

Jesus needed, and regularly sought out solitude. In order to do the things he needed to do, he needed times to get away to a quiet place to rest and pray. Throughout the gospels, we see six reasons, Jesus needed this time alone.²

The first was to prepare for a major task. The most iconic was how he spent forty days and nights in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan before the start of his public ministry.³

The second reason was to recharge after some very hard work. Before and after feeding the thousands of people with just a few fish and loaves of bread, Jesus and his disciples were tired.⁴ They needed rest from all the people and recharging their souls.

Do we have any self proclaimed introverts here? I can imagine that it is hard work always peopling, right? Even after something as good as coming to worship. Now I am an extrovert. I am fueled by being around people. But even after preaching, teaching, and connecting with so many people who ask for my attention, I get pretty tired and need to get away for rest and renewal.

The third reason we see Jesus getting away for solitude was to work through grief. After Jesus learned that his cousin John the Baptist was beheaded, he withdrew by himself to a solitary place.⁵

The fourth reason Jesus sought solitude was prior to making an important decision. Just before selecting his twelve disciples, Jesus went out onto a mountainside spent the night praying to God.⁶

The fifth reason Jesus sought solitude was in times of distress. Just hours before he was arrested, Jesus went up to the Mt. of Olives with his disciples to pray. He was in great emotional agony, knowing what he was about to face.⁷

¹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), 97.

² <https://toeverynation.com/6-times-when-jesus-chose-solitude-over-people/>

³ Luke 4:1-2, 14-15

⁴ Mark 6:30-32

⁵ Matthew 14:1-13

⁶ Luke 6:12

⁷ Luke 22:39-44

And finally, Jesus sought solitude so that he could focus on prayer. Talking with and listening to God, the Father.

Imagine if Elijah in our story today had been more intentional during his ministry to seek this important time of silence and solitude. God would not have had to ask him, “Elijah, what are you doing here? Or how is it that you have come to neglect your soul while doing all this great ministry and be in such rough shape?”

If Jesus needed silence, solitude, and sabbath to hear God’s whisper, so should we!

Another practice that Jesus modeled for us was how he honored the spirit of the Sabbath, even though at times he was accused of healing those in need on it. The fourth commandment from Deuteronomy says, “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates...[so that everyone can rest as you do. My paraphrase].⁸

Interesting that where Elijah ran to was Mt Horeb or Mt Sinai where Moses originally received these Ten Commandments from God. Everything happens for a reason. Unless we even slow down in reading the text, we can miss out important details that God wants us to grasp.

So we too need to learn to slow down at the very least, one day a week, so that we can hear from God.

Jesus said, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”⁹

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

Do we hear the invitation by Jesus’ Spirit there? Come to me. Get away with me. Walk with me. Learn from me. Keep company with me.

Jesus will never force himself upon us, but he certainly will woo us, gently, in our times of silence, solitude, and Sabbath.

Pete Greig in *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* asks, “Could it be that the Creator of the cosmos is meek and not pushy? Humble and not presumptuous? Unassuming and not intrusive? Jesus wears his charisma

⁸ Deuteronomy 5:12-15

⁹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Matthew 11:28-30.

lightly. He seems perfectly content to walk away from the spotlight of human attention and adulation.”¹⁰

As I close, I will share some practical things we could try to carve out times of silence, solitude, and Sabbath. In Richard Fosters’ Chapter on Solitude in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, he suggests taking advantage of “little solitudes” throughout the day. Those early morning moments in bed before the family awakens. A morning cup of coffee before beginning the work of the day. Sitting in bumper to bumper traffic during rush hour with the radio off. Silent prayer before a meal. A walk in the neighborhood after dinner.

We can also develop a regular ‘quiet place’ designed for silence and solitude. A room in our house or apartment. A special chair. A place on the back patio or deck. A room at the library. Those first few moments of quiet before worship begins and the prelude starts. Karen really cherishes quiet moments by the Christmas tree with its lights on before the rest of us get up.

We can begin to practice silence, solitude, and Sabbath when we stop our frantic hurry and work from sun down to sun down.

Several times a year, we can withdraw for three to four hours to focus on life goals and listen for God’s direction. We could keep a journal record of what comes to mind. And finally we can take a retreat, once year with no other purpose but silence and solitude.

Victorian poet and hymn writer Frederick Faber said, “There is hardly ever a complete silence in our soul. God is whispering to us well-nigh incessantly. Whenever the sounds of the world die out in the soul, or sink low, then we hear these whisperings of God. He is always whispering to us, only we do not always hear, because of the noise, hurry, and distraction which life causes as it rushes on.”

So may the Holy Spirit cause us to be more intentional with practicing silence, solitude, and Sabbath. May we learn from Jesus the unhurried rhythms of grace. And may we become more attentive to the gentle whisper of God. Amen.

¹⁰ Pete Greig, *How to Hear God, A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 147